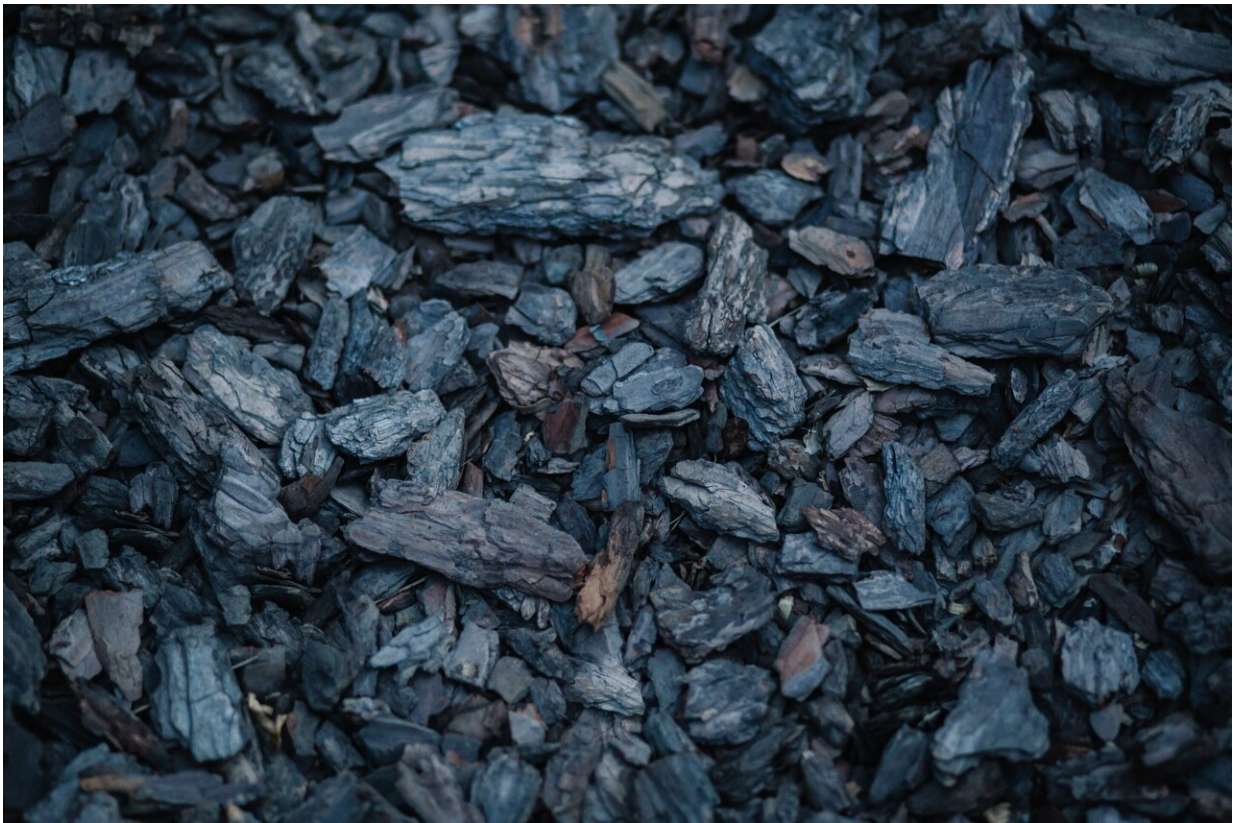


The world is burning the most coal ever to keep the lights on

December 17 2021, by Todd Gillespie



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

The world likely will generate more electricity from the dirtiest source this year than ever before, indicating just how far the energy transition still needs to run in the fight against climate change.

Coal-fueled generation is set to jump 9% from last year, according to an International Energy Agency report released Friday. That U-turn from the declines of the previous two years threatens the world's trajectory to reach net-zero emissions by 2050, the organization said.

The U.S. and European Union had the biggest increases in [coal](#) use at about 20% each, followed by India at 12% and China—the world's largest consumer—at 9%, the IEA estimated. The comeback is being driven by [economic recovery](#) from the Covid-19 pandemic, which is outpacing the ability of low-carbon energy sources to maintain supply.

"Coal is the single largest source of global carbon emissions, and this year's historically high level of coal power generation is a worrying sign of how far off track the world is in its efforts to put emissions into decline toward net zero," IEA Executive Director Fatih Birol said.

Record [natural gas prices](#) have increased reliance on other sources, including coal, and amplified calls for faster investments in renewables. Power prices in Europe have more than tripled in the past six months, and it's become more profitable to burn coal than gas. Still, utilities have struggled to get their hands on it even as China and the U.S. boost production.

Carbon-dioxide emissions from coal in 2024 are now predicted to be at least 3 billion tons higher than in a scenario reaching net-zero by 2050, the report said. The IEA expects peak coal to occur next year at 8.11 billion tons, with the biggest production increases coming from China, Russia and Pakistan.

The Paris-based IEA said in May that development of new oil, gas and coal sources must stop this year if the world is to meet emissions targets in line with the Paris Agreement. Climate campaigners were dismayed in November when a key aspiration of the United Nations' COP26 climate

summit in Scotland was watered down to produce a pledge to "phase down"—rather than "phase out"—coal use. U.S. President Joe Biden's administration since has halted federal aid to new fossil-fuel projects abroad.

Some banks have pledged to phase out their financing of coal, though activists want to see greater urgency. This year, coal demand as a whole—for [power generation](#) as well as cement and steel production—is set to rise by 6%, the IEA said.

That demand could set a record next year, depending on economic growth and weather patterns, the agency said. One Australian exporter predicts strong demand for at least two more decades.

Regional disparities in use are playing out globally as Europe shuts down coal power stations while China and India step up production. The European Union ramped up its climate pledge in July, targeting a 55% drop in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, relative to a 1990 baseline, with a transition to cleaner sources at the center. It's a tough target, especially considering that countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic primarily power themselves with coal and lignite.

For now, China accounts for about half of global coal production and needs to meet rising domestic demand. The government has pressured miners to reduce prices and lower the cost of burning coal during this year's energy crisis, which triggered blackouts and rationing in the country.

"It is disappointing that coal power may hit an all-time high in the very same year that countries agreed to phase it down," said Dave Jones, global program lead at climate think-tank Ember. "Coal power will inevitably begin to decline soon: China has committed to phasing down coal from 2025, while India's huge renewables target should remove the

need for more coal."

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